

Sustainability, Impact, Identity and the University Arts Centre

A Panel Discussion 2012

Transcript

Introduction

The academically housed Contemporary Arts Centre “Axis Arts Centre” <http://www.axisartscentre.org.uk/home/> in the Department of Contemporary Arts, Manchester Metropolitan University, has been running for more than 30 years and is known to foreground contemporary arts in the northwest of England and is co-funded by the University and Arts Council England. In response to a continuous expansion, over the last 3 years we have generated discussion and debate around the role and value of small academically housed arts centres, specifically issues around sustainability of regular programming and their impact within a diversity of communities. These discussions - with different view-points and contemporary challenges - have informed the ways we continue to develop our provision as a department AND an arts centre.

In this process, the public panel discussion transcript represents the debate from its various perspectives, leading and simultaneously guiding us towards reconceptualising a more dynamic model on which to build the Centre’s sustainability, identity, and be able to maximise impact.



Context

The centenary celebrations of MMU Cheshire in June 2012, afforded the Department of Contemporary Arts an opportunity to engage in public discussion on a variety of issues relating to the contemporary arts. The Department engages in learning, teaching and research across the following disciplines: Dance, Drama, Theatre, Music, Creative Writing, and socially engaged Community Practices. It is also home to the Axis Arts Centre, which provides a publically funded programme of performance work in South Cheshire. This transcript brings forward an exchange of ideas between members of staff involved with considerations of sustainability and impact of our Arts Centre provision in the context of the multiple communities it serves.

The panel members were:

Carola Boehm – Head of Department

Jodie Gibson – Director of Community Outreach and Development

Neil Mackenzie – Academic and Artistic Director Axis Arts Centre

Jane Linden – Academic and Curator of the Axis Arts Centre Project Space (OpenSpace)

Ornette Clennon – Visiting Enterprise Fellow and Lecturer

Gavin Carver – Academic and Principle Lecturer on Enterprise

Carola Boehm:

Welcome. We are at a point in time where we want and need to expand our Arts Centre provision in order to reflect our developing interests and communities, which prompts questions of how exactly we should expand, and how we can expand sustainably. This discussion is organised around individual statements by our panel members that articulate the different roles we play and how they function and interact in terms of the Arts Centre. Indeed – the term ‘arts centre’ in itself might be problematic, which we will unpick as we go on.

The Axis Arts Centre is housed in an academic department. It is an academically run centre, it is an academically programmed centre but with a public-facing remit. As we will hear, the programming within the arts centre has a close relationship with the learning communities both here and external to the institution. We are funded by Arts Council England, which of course means that we cannot be simply inward-looking and self serving, we need to develop a larger vision, despite – and perhaps because of – the fact that we are located in a small semi-rural town in Cheshire.

We moved from our rural campus to exciting new purpose-built premises in Crewe in 2009. Having settled ourselves in to our new campus we now feel very ready to consider new ways of doing things, whilst addressing some of the inevitable questions, tensions and challenges that come with change of any kind.

This of course is where today’s discussion begins; how do we develop sustainable provision, and how do we ensure that we generate the kinds of activity that have real impact, and indeed how can we find ways to measure that impact. So, this panel discussion aims to generate debate around small academically housed arts centres, and to make explicit these issues about sustainability, programming, and the impact on and within diverse communities. On the whole we believe that we currently operate a sustainable model, but as we are now at a point where we want to expand – how do we ensure that our renewed provision can remain sustainably effective?

As part of the panel discussion we will feature different viewpoints, all of these viewpoints together will form a first hypothesis or statement towards a possible model.

In the first instance we are will explore issues around programming strategies followed by issues arising from research activity and the idea of ‘curating’ knowledge. We’re also going to discuss community engagement — what might this mean – how does it fit in with our learning and teaching agendas, what is the relationship with the Arts Centre, and how do we actually impact into communities? And how in turn do the communities impact on our activities? Finally we will discuss the relationship between enterprise and the Axis Arts Centre, and community development – which we identify as different to or separate from community engagement.

The first person I am going to invite to say a few words about the Axis Arts Centre, and the context around it, is Neil Mackenzie, the artistic director of the Axis Arts Centre.

Neil Mackenzie:

Thank you very much. I'll give a small bit of history, because I think that is quite an important context here. We can trace the arts centre back to around 1980 as the cultural program of the Alsager College, clearly something that was organised for the students to add to the experience of being at college. It's interesting because we're always coming out of that context, we're always coming out of that academic starting point, and I think that's what Carola is referring to. Increasingly over the years we've grown and become more concerned with attracting the audience outside of campus, outside of the academic context, and trying to understand what that means as we do that is a really interesting question, and is something that we have been working on for ages.

Being within an academy on one level means that it's feeding the students, but on another level it means it's accessing the expertise of the staff. There's an interesting thing that therefore we have a pedagogical responsibility to the students, but we do claim a level of expertise, that we know about contemporary arts that are operating in this country and therefore what we can offer here is something quite high-end in that sense. Obviously this works closely with the student needs, but once we look at an arts centre in a broader sense of a public facility then the expertise we bring to the table is an interesting quality that needs to be understood and placed appropriately.

Over the time that I've been involved, since 1996, there's been a substantial development of arts practices in the country and internationally. Live art is something that has been developing a lot and there have been many conferences and many situations where people have been wondering about live art, what it is, how we support it, and what arts centres responsibilities are to live artists and how that fits to the art subject, and all of those sorts of things. That's been something that we've been connected to as well, a debate that we've been connected to. There's a very rigorous culture of live art, even though it's always struggling for funds, always struggling to identify its key venues, there is still that kind of live art context that now has quite an established history in this country. To some extent we're a live arts venue as well as being something that has come out of a pedagogical function, and something that also represents a position of high-end expertise on arts practice.

I think what is becoming interesting these days now that we're here, and now that we're in the context that we're in, is the immediate context of the Department. The Department has always been a major player, right from the beginning, and the Department itself has changed a lot. One of the ways in which it's changed is that it has become more discipline specific. We are the Department of Contemporary Arts, but the arts are all pretty separated. For a long time academics and practitioners talk about how contemporary art is interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, it's always about working against those kinds of boundaries. Yet the Department, for various logistical reasons based around recruitment seems to have become more discipline specific. As an arts centre we have a responsibility to an area of practice that is cross disciplinary or interdisciplinary, whilst needing to feed a local context which is more discipline specific. This sets up an interesting tension between ourselves and our core audiences, the students who say 'I'm a drama student' or 'I'm a dance student'. There's a sense of that out in the public as well, sometimes people think 'I want to go and see some dance' or 'I'm interested in poetry, so I want to go to a poetry event'. I think the public worry less about the disciplines, and are interested in things that cross over, which is an interesting thing, and there are those tensions, the internal ones against the external ones.

We've always been wedded to the idea of innovation, and I think that will always be really important to us, that this is about innovative practice, it's about the cutting edge – whatever that means, and how the meaning of that changes over time. That's a rough sense of what drives the programming of the arts centre.

I should also say that really importantly, the arts centre changed about three years ago from being a little programme of work that happened in two seasons, to an organisation that has a much greater potential for engaging the local public and communities. This makes life very different, there's always a constant blur, and we did this with the name as well, keeping the sense of a 'centre'. It's a centre, but it's not this building. Yet if you arrive on campus and ask for the Axis Arts Centre you will

be pointed to this building. There is the desire for people to understand a centre as a place, as a specific building. Here a lot of students call this building the Axis Arts Centre. Already that's three versions of what the Axis Arts Centre is, and I think there are more as well. I probably should be able to contain the Axis Arts Centre as a single thing and say 'The Axis Arts Centre is this...' but I think that others would disagree, and I think that's good. It's a fairly difficult thing to pin down, but I think it might be useful as we go through this discussion, as people look at what Axis Arts Centre is there may be confusion as people are talking about slightly different things, and conceptions that are slightly different.

Carola Boehm:

One area you haven't touched upon is that there is yet another tension, a creative tension, that we are funded by the Arts Council. Their suggestions of how we should operate do not always sit in line with the old Alsager college educational notion that we do this only for our students.

Neil Mackenzie:

Yes, that's really embedded in the split between us being a pedagogical centre and a public centre. And also in an academic research sense as well. I think, quite rightly, that the Arts Council will look at a university – a big, potentially quite wealthy institution, and say 'why should we be giving you money to do something which is predominantly for students?' We've always had to think this through very carefully, and I've always been very clear that all our energies feed into its public intentions and potential public function within the region. It takes much energy to even have a public conception of this place, and then to make the public conception actually operate effectively for the region and the local people is even bigger and more difficult, and I think the Arts Council want to know that this difficult issue is something that we think about, and I know that we always have done.

Carola Boehm:

(...) which we will see when we move onto our other panel members. You also mentioned research, as I said before we are embedded within an academic arts department, and as we have professional practitioners working within our department, professional practice (and its processes) constitute part of our research activity. So, what are the questions that we should be asking ourselves in relation to the Axis Arts Centre? How might we bring these two seemingly different agendas together? I'm now going to hand over to Jane Linden the Curator of the OpenSpace, and the project leader of the Curating Knowledge series.

Jane Linden:

I'll talk a little bit about the OpenSpace first because the Curating Knowledge agenda arises from activities that happen in the OpenSpace. This is an interesting space, but the agenda for it arises out of a fortunate collision of three things. Firstly, the legacy of a visual arts department and its gallery space at the former Alsager campus. Secondly, the current mixed disciplinary teaching within the Department. Thirdly, the growing graduate and postgraduate interest in practice as research. Those are the three things that come together to form a curatorial agenda for the OpenSpace. Despite this move from Alsager, and the loss of a dedicated gallery space, we have risen phoenix-like

from the ashes to create something that feels much more appropriate and contemporary. This is where all arts practices and the consideration of all arts audiences and participants can rub up against each other. The OpenSpace is a foyer space, not a studio space or a black/white box space. So it's a non-place, it's an in-between space, but it's also a very specific site for discourse and engagement. This is absolutely key, and certainly links up with this idea of curating knowledge.

At any one time, a visitor to the OpenSpace could see a whole collision of things happening. There will be artistic objects in the space, there will be performance interventions, there will be students rehearsing, there will be people rushing through, people having their lunch there – a whole range of activities rubbing up against each other in that space. We actually embrace this kind of energy, and the conflicts that can sometimes arise from these collisions. The idea is that it becomes in itself a kind of discursive space; the collisions become part of the discourse. There are different kinds of communities that the space will serve, as well as the artistic community that will have differing agendas. Arising out of this, and as part of the continuing development of this concept of practice as research came the idea for Curating Knowledge. What might it mean if we could in fact expose some of our research processes, rather than just showing the end products that arise out of artistic research? How would it be if we excavated this and offered it as some kind of exchange? Certainly to a research community, to ourselves, to our students, as a sharing creative knowledge exchange. To really open up discussion and debate around this and there is the hope that you might actually find new audiences for that exposure of work. That's been part of the agenda for Curating Knowledge. In practical terms how it works is that we invite people to propose a residency for the space, so an artist practitioner comes with a wealth of documented practices: DVD's; videos; maps; drawings...materials. All of which helps constitute a view of a process, but we also invite artists to work in the space, to consider the space as a site to engage and interact with. Also to engage with the different kinds of communities and people who walk through the space, and create discussion about the work, or elements of the work, that might stimulate different kinds of activities or conversations about things.

Curating Knowledge is a curatorial research project – I actually engaged in a practice based curatorial PhD where I was looking very closely at the discussions that can emerge and the different levels of encounter that we can have with a close relationship with a research process. The idea is not to create activity in that space that alienates, but rather that draws people in.

Carola Boehm:

Just to emphasise one point about practice as research, because that methodology is also embedded within our teaching curriculum – particularly at post-graduate level. This notion that we want to train, educate, facilitate the learning of thinking practitioners, or reflective practitioners...This is where the practice as research comes in quite substantially and the Curating Knowledge series in the OpenSpace is in one sense an explicit making at the top end, in its dialogue with the very idea of a practitioner's engagement with their own practice and their ability to disseminate the research inquiries that inform it.

Jane Linden:

Absolutely. We always talk about how we engage with end on artwork, how it affects us, what we think it means, or there's writing about it somewhere on a dusty library shelf. Some elements of this work might be available on the internet, but how often do we actually engage with that kind of product in a deeper sense? It really is this idea that you can make the research processes accessible in all sorts of different ways. Obviously our students are engaged in that kind of thing in their own studies, it's just exemplified much further as part of the practice as research agenda. Of course that process is incredibly engaging, we tend to privilege artworks as the actual product to be engaged

with... that is put forward for the public. In fact, process is equally engaging, and a whole range of different kind of artworks or products emerge from turning our attention to the process of artmaking and the thinking that arises from that process.

Carola Boehm:

Moving on to a slightly different topic – we’ve heard about the Axis Arts Centre and the different seasons and events, we’ve heard about the gallery and the practice as research Curating Knowledge side of things. I’m now going to hand over to Gavin – one of our newest members of staff, he has significant involvement in activities with other universities, and so has a really good insight into how other structures and other organisations actually support arts activities within an academic context.

Gavin Carver:

I will start by saying that being new to Axis and being new to the university it is interesting to see how we operate, but what is also interesting is thinking about how one might operate. I think it’s fair to say that, in preparing for this presentation and learning more about Axis, there are so many flaws regarding how an arts centre might operate within a higher education institution. It seems to me that they can operate essentially predominantly inward looking or predominantly outward looking, and the funding that they attract will reflect that identity. This depends on the nature of the institution and the nature of local competing institutions as well. It seems to me in all cases, if you’re calling something an art centre – I like this idea that the art centre is an idea more than a place – but inevitably its impression externally is as a place, however much of an idea it may be. Really what I wanted to focus on, beside the different models of operation, is what the idea of this place as a place means, and what it means in terms of enterprise. The first thing to say is that in very few models of operation is anyone looking at the enterprise as income generating; we’re talking about enterprise as a social contribution. That may have indirect financial benefit – recruiting of students and so on, but that in itself is a cultural asset to the university. That is an important thing; there are very few cultural assets within most universities. Within Cheshire campus the gym is accessible to a certain extent; and people may come onto campus to use one or two other resources. Other universities may have a museum, or a park, or a swimming pool. These cultural assets are incredibly important to the way a university presents itself. I give myself the luxury of using a word that colleagues hate – and with good reason – which is brand. The university inevitably constructs an image of itself through the way it presents its arts centre, and not just through the programming, but that it is not to say I think the programming should be entirely slavish to the university mission, but none the less, it is part of the university’s presentation to the outside world. It’s a portal for that, and therefore how we present ourselves and the values for the university, internally and externally become embedded in the institution, in its foyer spaces and it’s OpenSpace as much as in its programming.

The function of the arts centre as a focus of activity, a place that people need to be, externally and internally, a place that is a venue of choice, becomes quite important to the role of the university in that relationship with its students, the region, and indeed with the sector.

Very briefly, as I’m sure this will be touched on more, the relationship with the arts generating sector is quite important. Theatre going audiences are declining by around 9% a year, whereas until recent glitches the consumers – students – are increasing. So we are serving a generation of new audiences as well, it’s not only an external audience, but a potential future audience. In terms of relationship with the sector, the thing that universities are very good at is encouraging reflection, encouraging practitioners to think about the work that they are making. It seems to me that most models of arts centres somehow, within their practice, allow space for co-developing work, or bringing people in, and allowing academics, or students, or programmer’s the time and space with

practitioners. That doesn't always happen through a public programming activity, it may happen through postgraduate work, and that again interfaces with an arts centre, if you have a public facing venue you are more likely to be able to encourage and generate work from practitioners who need to reflect on their practice. The Arts Council has certainly, in certain areas, has been debating long and hard about what excellence in practice is. If there is any partner with the arts council to talk about excellence, it is probably universities, because our job is to constantly decide what is excellent. We claim to be excellent; we claim to teach our students excellence, and to assess excellence. I think our role in enterprise is also to engage with excellence and develop excellence within the sector.

Another role from an enterprise perspective is brokering relationships. Again, it comes down to being a portal, a place to be, a nexus. Not all artists that come into an arts centre and not all members of the arts-interested public seek the expertise of academics in drama; they may be seeking the expertise or the interest of academics within computing and engineering – again highlighting this idea of brokering, and the place becoming a nexus.

A few other notes, depending on your model, some arts centres, in some institutions are entirely run by students. Others use students in certain aspects of their delivery, be it front of house, stage management, publicity and so on. In every way, arts centres are a good place for that professionalisation; as an interface between the professions (whatever that may mean) and student learning. A socio-cultural nexus, at its best perhaps when all of these things come together, and that is the hardest thing to negotiate, but that is when you get the HEO's, local corporate agencies, the public, the institution it's students and staff working on these ideas. It's a place of debate as well.

Carola Boehm:

Just to pick up on one point quickly before we move on, you mention the idea of a social nexus, which feeds very nicely into what the next panel member will be talking about.

I want to quickly pick up on your notion of branding, of course it is, as you said, about presentation—internally, as well as externally; it is about identity. This is what we are also discussing here – how do we see ourselves? Why do we see ourselves the way we do? How do we want audiences to see us? From a commercial point of view you would call this branding, from our point of view it might be called ideology or philosophy. Programming strategies feed into that as well. It is an interesting aspect to shine a light on.

I am going to use your reference to the socio-cultural nexus, and hand over to Jodie, who as Director of our community outreach is responsible for how the community engagement happens. How does the Axis Arts Centre engage audiences that are not on campus? Of course there is another remit as well; we want our students, as part of encouraging young talent to have the abilities and experience of a professional environment. Would you like to say a few words about that, Jodie?

Jodie Gibson:

Of course. I joined the Art Centre and the University three years ago. It was a joint funded post for three years – half funded by the University and half funded by the Arts Council, with two fundamental remits. Firstly, to enhance the Arts Centre's profile and customer experience whilst invigorating the cultural relationships that existed, and establishing new audiences. Secondly, to expand the remits of the Arts Centre to incorporate all outward facing arts activity of MMU Cheshire. So, not even just the Department of Contemporary Arts, but the entire faculty. That therefore includes falling in line with University agendas such as public engagement. Those were the two remits that I was challenged with. There is immediately lots of tie-in to the conversations that we've had here. You can't forget that we're based within an academic environment, and some of the

barriers that exist within that as soon as you try to engage new audiences in a rural setting with low arts engagement, particularly locally in Crewe.

Then you've got the challenge of the art forms that we've been discussing – contemporary – and what that means. Then we have the locality; we're not in the centre of a town, we don't have the visibility. The programme – it's not a venue, it's a programme of work that we offer. Although it is linked to a venue, a centre, as Neil said, for some. That centre is tucked away at the back of the campus as well, so the campus has barriers for attracting new audiences.

There are other challenges as well with regards to customer experience and how good we are at offering the kind of customer experience you may offer in a cultural venue in a city centre, where the collective within that venue are professionalised to focus on that customer experience. Of course we look at the customer experience that we offer students and visitors to the university, but is it in the same way that you may afford those experiences at other cultural venues?

When I first arrived it was very much about trying to tease out some of these challenges, and make a way forward. Some of the findings that I have experienced over the three years are about taking work off campus – we have the two seasons of work that Neil and Jane are programming for. It's about generating audiences for that work. It's also about what we do between those seasons, during the seasons to enhance the experiences and create further connections with the work: reflection; debate; a bit of a 'way in' and interest. Some of the initiatives that have been successful in doing that are taking work out – off campus. We take work to a festival, for example, where the people are choosing to engage already in that festival and we then profile some work that they don't usually self-select as an art form. We are part of that expansion and challenge and new experiences that may draw people back to engage with us in our more familiar setting. We've had particular success for engagement projects; schools projects for example, such as an initiative we've run for two years – *Picture This*. This works with young people in formal education settings, raising aspiration through arts projects.

I've been on a local community radio for the last year, creating a network – talking about contemporary arts. I'm able to bring contemporary arts, artists and students into the studio and discuss what is coming up, and open up debate and conversations that might otherwise be missing from community radio stations.

We've recently begun partnership with Cheshire Rural Touring Arts. They're working with Neil who can offer some insights into contemporary arts programming, perhaps that expertise that Neil referred to. They offer the network already in place within rural settings for us to then co-program work into those networks, and as such reach much further afield than simply platforming work on-campus.

The bigger challenge for me is that dichotomy between Neil, the arts centre director, who has that ownership for his artistic vision and what that encompasses through the arts centre - supported by Jane's own vision for Curating Knowledge and the OpenSpace. Alongside that is the University voice, the Department voice, and the individuals within that department. There are many voices there, and this, for good reason is valued but an artistic director for many venues must build on that vision, whilst protecting the individual curatorial and programming visions within the wider scope of our remit. We've already discussed the many voices and agendas that have to come through, and that again is a complexity; if you're protecting a brand and an artistic vision, then what is allowed to be included and promoted externally and internally to the multiplicity of people that engage with us through that?

Carola Boehm:

So it sometimes comes down to the question: 'is this activity part of the Axis Arts Centre? Is this activity part of the Contemporary Arts Department? Is this activity part of the Faculty?'

Jodie Gibson:

Absolutely.

Carola Boehm:

In addition to that, you mention *Picture This*. There must be a vested interest in these projects, with *Picture This* as an example, of course a fantastic, excellent project. Yes, it's not just in terms of valuable community engagement, but the project also takes the university out into communities, raising aspirations of young kids to possibly think about studying arts at a university, so suddenly it comes under the university's widening participation and recruitment strategies.

Jodie Gibson:

They are some of the other agendas at work within a university, and an organisation. They're the agendas that I'm working with and promoting, whilst keeping an eye on the collegiate nature of universities, where people have differing perspectives.

Carola Boehm:

You mention a self-selecting audience. It is probably fair to say that in the past...I'm still a new kid on the block in terms of the Axis Arts Centre, and I'm sure that we were all interventionists in all sorts of areas...but in general the programming and the structures around it were about self-selecting audiences. Of course within arts centres, this is the traditional way to do it, we've always had experimental art which was interventionist, which went out there, went into people's faces and said 'here's my art!' but not on a strategic level. Which is where I wanted to hand over to Ornette, you know him as someone who is involved in the *Musicians for Heritage* project, but he is also our community development expert. There is a different model isn't there? At the moment we are wondering if this is part of the Axis Arts Centre. Is this part of the Department? Where do we fit this kind of work in? There is a significant change here in the way we engage with audiences, isn't there?

Ornette Clennon:

I'd like to come into this in terms of measuring impact of what we do in the academy. When we talk about measuring impact, it throws up some deep and philosophical issues about our product and what it is we want to measure. As an arts centre we want to move beyond project assessments, as already measure the impact of what we do in terms of looking at postcodes; and audience numbers, and inferring some demographic data from that. If you want to move beyond that and look at the impact of being a cultural asset, then our measurement systems have to begin, or take place at the end of the delivery of the product. We're not going to measure social impact in the theatre, it has to happen elsewhere. There are systems in place, for instance there is a relatively new system advocated by some researchers called Deep Feedback. Really this is just an intricate programme evaluation where audiences are contacted on the telephone, attend focus groups, and

arrange blogs online for people to contribute to, so there's a mixed mode delivery of data collection after the event.

If we want to measure the outcomes of our output on beneficiaries, I suppose we need to ask what are outputs are. If we're focussed on live arts and pedagogical function, with the expertise of the staff – all jostling for their voices – as was mentioned before, how do we measure the impact of all of that?

So before I touch on that, as I have no answers really, I want to briefly survey general methods of impact measurement that we currently use within the sector. There's advocacy and promotion, which is basically promotional material, that's part of the feasibility study. There's project assessment, which is usually an internal document that someone like Jodie would probably produce, which looks at a range of visitor numbers, postcodes and demographic instances from that data. There's programme evaluation, using questionnaires and focus groups etc.; we could argue till we're blue in the face about which systems to use within that. There are also performance indicators, which are potentially useful as they give us baseline factors that we can compare after our intervention. Being funded by the Arts Council, they might have given us performance indicators to measure our interventions against. There are also impact assessments and longitudinal impact assessments, which try to look at the impact of the social, economic and environmental impact on communities, or the audience. You have measurement systems such as the Social Audit and Accounting system, which is a triple bottom line of environment, health and economic impact. You also have Social Return on Investments as well, which aims to do that.

The challenge with those particular mechanisms for measuring impact is they're closely looking at economic impact, but in order to do that researchers have to use proxy measurements; guestimate to somehow quantify economically various services of a centre or a community. Often the data that we would use to estimate the approximate value of a service tends to be out of date. There is also the discussion about can cultural activities actually result in economic impact – which is too big an issue to discuss just now, but it is a big thing.

There is a big move to look at the softer social impacts that we can measure around quality of life, wellbeing, health and personal development. I think those softer social impacts dovetail quite neatly into the concept of our being a cultural asset, because then we can begin to talk about how we measure the cultural-ness of our being an asset.

I just wanted to tie-in to some practice as research, because often with trying to measure outputs, it tends to be the output not the process that is concentrated on – as Jane was saying. There is a move towards documenting the process of the impact of the output and intervention, pluralistic-universalistic normativity, which basically means looking at the process and not so much the outcome. An example that comes to mind, I've forgotten the company name, but they were looking at the wellbeing aspect of dance on elderly people. There was this whole debate around the quality of the dance – is that relevant? How do we measure how successful that actually was? There was the general consensus that it wasn't actually about the older people dancing, it was about the process of what they were getting from that experience of learning to dance, and the impact on their wellbeing and self-esteem. Excavating the process of development, be it community or artistic, is actually quite key.

If the creation and the promotion of our outputs are factored into these impact indicators it's actually going to be quite difficult to collect the data we need in the first place. If we have outputs that are live art and radical art inherent in that, one can say that there will be a cultural impact, because there will be some sort of audience response. Then it becomes a question of how do we mediate that product to the consumer, the audience, in order to gather that information of cultural impact. Then you could have an output that is specifically geared to the transformation, which then will have the data collection mechanisms embedded in that more clearly.

Carola Boehm:

Can I just jump in with that – that is a crucial point isn't it? It's where we realise that, in more simple terms...that we're thinking of taking some of our projects from community engagement to community development. Maybe you want to say a few words to differentiate these two terms, because I think in our department, there is awareness that there might be a difference here - that there is a difference between community engagement and community development.

Ornette Clennon:

Yes, now I'm going to cover that, but look at the concepts of community engagement and community development from an arts centre perspective in terms of audience development. There is a clear progression between those two things. Jodie was talking about *Picture This* as an outreach project, so there are existing models within arts organisations in terms of extended marketing, where you're targeting lapsed subscribers and trying to tempt them back to your programme. There's also taste cultivation, where you're trying to introduce a core audience to another art form. There's also audience education, where perhaps you want to inform the audience about a certain product or event. Then you have the outreach where you're trying to bring new audiences in.

That's quite a neat progression, within that you have the engagement because in terms of expanding marketing you are engaging and putting strategies forward to try and get your subscribers back. Definitely by the time you get to taste cultivation, you're offering choices to your market and audience education, you're engaging. You could still say that when you start to do outreach, that could then be the transition from engagement to development. It could, but it's not yet.

Carola Boehm:

Could I maybe bring Neil and Jane into this; it seems to be a very static framework there. Of course one of the difficulties with universities is that they're complex, lively things, doing things in all different directions, and it never quite fits into a strategy. Our students are involved with communities, we are involved with communities, and communities come on board in various ways. There is a question of straightforward, progressive strategy, and I wonder if there might be other ways to do it. Of course one thing that we can exploit from an Axis Arts Centre point of view is that we are a university with the resources. There is the enthusiasm to do all sorts of projects, with students, with communities, and it has all sorts of benefits.

Jane Linden:

How we actually measure impact of these activities in the OpenSpace for example? It's a difficult one...

Carola Boehm:

There are two things, on the one hand – how do we measure impact of, in our case, the Axis Arts Centre. Also, are there ways – and this is what Ornette is proposing – to engage in projects or activities that embed in some way a bringing in of community to the activities of Axis Arts Centre, or Contemporary Arts Department.

Ornette Clennon:

Which could potentially have social impact, or transformational outputs. So within the Kawashima model that I put forward of audience development, the outreach section is at the nexus between community engagement and community development, is because it's all in the nature of the detail, the amount of resources and time that you can put into the outreach. If the outreach phase of developing a new audience lasted 18 months, and within the duration of that process, actually began to generate and leave behind various cultural and community infrastructures then you could begin to talk about that particular part of audience outreach as community development. It's still a contentious word this 'community development' because it means different things to different people, but in terms of leaving the public, or community that the arts centre serves with some sort of cultural infrastructure that is transformational...that could be thought of in terms of community development.

You see, this really forces us to look at whether our outputs will do that, and nor should they.

Jane Linden:

I think there is a danger that there are real conflicting agendas here. If I was to try and measure the impact of the activities in the OpenSpace, that would be really hard. A lot of the time, students might be absorbing things through osmosis. They'll walk through that space and perhaps never directly engage with anything, or enter into direct discourse about it. Yet we have to have faith that such activity is in some way doing something; that it is exciting something within our students and anyone else that chooses to come in – there are many levels of engagement and they are difficult to determine. How can you measure how something might stir the imagination or inspire – particularly when it might not be immediately recognisable to the individual...maybe somewhere down the line...weeks, years afterwards...something might cohere...come together. It's incredibly difficult to measure impact from this kind of practice in the terms that Ornette puts forward.

What I would suggest is that we need an interim situation whereby you have an agenda to bring in new audiences, to measure impact within the communities that you serve. This may be a different kind of research project. I would welcome suggestions on how we might do this... have some kind of dialogue about how we could facilitate something that allows me to retain the integrity of my own curatorial agenda, or Neil's agenda for radical contemporary practice. We are beginning to consider how we forge a bridge between our activities and agendas – and, in time, we may possibly meet somewhere in the middle.

Ornette Clennon:

The actual bridge is what you were talking about as practice as research. I'm a latecomer to the concept of practice as research. It wasn't until I started reflecting quite deeply on a project which I was wrapping up this evening, as it happens, where I was looking at how social capital was created in the project, how communities were connected, how community infrastructures and knowledge were actually created in this project that I began to excavate those processes. In various ways of measuring social community development, they can rely on the performance indicator method as a baseline. There is a general movement in terms of examining and really interrogating the process of how those relationships are being made within the community. It's that process that is the impact and it being measured. It's not formalised in any way, but I do feel that there is this growing movement towards quality qualitative studies in terms of the process of change and transformation.

Carola Boehm:

It comes back to the question 'what is a social asset?' Is it an infrastructure? Is it really a project that puts a studio in a community that continues after the project? Or is it putting the knowledge in a community to self-sustain the activities? Or is it the knowledge that contemporary art is something else? I'm going to bring in Neil here, I suppose we are famed for bringing quite famous names to the Axis Arts Centre, so there is a cultural asset, a cultural value, which is difficult to measure. We know we are influential, but where is the evidence?

Neil Mackenzie:

I think that's true. You talk about names that people might recognise, but there are not a huge number of contemporary arts practitioner's names that people will recognise very widely. We're automatically in a relatively unknown area of practice. Jodie's working very closely with schools, we can access young people, and put them in direct contact with work because we think it's good for them and their school thinks is good for them, which is fine. How do we reach the people that don't exist within those structures, and don't know this practice? There's a very big project there, and we can talk about how we assess impact, or in the first instance – how we create impact, before we assess if any impact has been made. That's a significant problem. Universities are juggernauts really; they're so committed to three years of students, and the student experience. It is just three years. It has a big social impact because of where students come from, and where they go afterwards. In terms of our potential impact on the community, not including those that are art students, going to be art students or used to be art students, are potential to hit those people – it feels like a vast cultural shift needs to happen. For an institution like this to genuinely look outside as say: 'how do we deal with you? You're just down the road, but we have no contact with you.' It's not arts centres necessarily, or academic arts centres, it's just universities.

Gavin Carver:

The contentious question is: do all arts centres within universities need to do that? In the research I've done leading up to this, two very distinct models emerge. One is the inward facing, saying that the people we must respond to first are our students and our staff. In that particular instance there was no external funding. They were very well funded internally; they had a lot of research and student fee income supporting a reasonably exciting programme of work. They said they were glad to be located in the middle of a campus, as they don't need the other tension on what they might be.

Another place I went to was absolutely the opposite. The students are here, and it's great, they come and see the work and we support them where we can, but actually, although it's about the cultural asset of the university, our primary responsibility is to make that available to people outside the university. It's a fundamental question really. There are six people around this table, all of which are representing different stakeholders.

Jodie Gibson:

As you're fairly new to the university, which camp do you think this arts centre falls in?

Gavin Carver:

Listening to this debate I think it's trying to fall into both.

Jodie Gibson:

I don't think it clearly falls into either one from what you've just highlighted. This is where some of the challenges, perhaps excitements, and the flux allows us to get involved in a kind of promiscuous way, but it creates more challenges for us in that very nature. Perhaps that's a discussion about whether we clearly need to define if we do need to get into a camp, and which camp it is.

Carola Boehm:

Personally I feel very comfortable with us being in both camps. I feel that as an institution, specifically as a department, we are particularly strong in allowing our students to be part of that community. We are really very good at bringing young talent into the professional world through the arts centre, through the activities that our staff engage with, from the moment they come here they are suddenly involved in lots of activities. I can see lots of student ambassadors here tonight. That's part of the job, being at events like this, where you are suddenly engaged on a professional level. I think we're strong in that. The arts centre has always managed, as far as I can gather, to allow students to be a part of those professional communities. I think that's one thing that we want to retain. At the same time, of course, because we are professional we want to be funded from the external authorities that tell us we are doing innovative work. The funding from the Arts Council suggests to us, or gives us the authority to say, we are at the cutting edge. So it is a double-edged sword. I feel very comfortable with it, because it fits.

Ornette Clennon:

I think there's absolutely nothing wrong with that, and I feel comfortable with it as well. What I would say is that if we are going to straddle both worlds, and indeed other worlds, then we need to have clear systems and mechanisms in place that allow us to straddle effectively. We can have multiple identities, and we ought to, but if we don't know how to perform those identities, and the infrastructure isn't in place, we won't be very effective.

Carola Boehm:

Which infrastructure would you suggest we need to put in place?

Ornette Clennon:

From my point of view, that would be looking at how we could transit from community engagement into community development, without overshadowing the other voices and other activities. In order to do that, there does need to be structure, but I don't know what that is.

Carola Boehm:

We've got the structures in place, in some sense you could say that we have the Department of Contemporary Arts which is the structure. We're in the unique position that the Axis Arts Centre is housed completely in one department, so we are able to say 'our staff' will run it. In that sense, there might be a structure already there. It comes back to the discussion that we've all engaged in recently; where does the Axis Arts Centre end and the Department of Contemporary Arts begin?

Ornette Clennon:

We haven't described the path for potential community development, where will the structure be in Axis for community development to be one of the many functions? Not the only one, but one of the many functions.

Carola Boehm:

What would this structure entail? I think that we already have one; there is of course the Department and funded projects. If we take the example of *Musicians for Heritage* it's an interesting one. Sometimes we think why is *Picture This* part of the Axis Arts Centre's bigger context and *Musicians for Heritage* is not. One of the answers to that is simply because *Picture This* was co-ordinated by someone who is officially connected to the Axis Arts Centre, whereas *Musicians for Heritage* was co-ordinated at the start by someone that wasn't.

Jodie Gibson:

Interestingly, I pulled back on advertising *Picture This* as an Axis Arts Centre activity. It's not promoted on Facebook, we don't promote it through the Axis Arts Centre because if you assess the project, it falls into the artistic director's vision, then as a project it doesn't. That's interesting, but because I have two hats; one for some outward, public facing work programmed by Neil and Jane, and another for all of the other university agendas and projects, widening participation, public engagement, which *Picture This* was born out of. The two hats, at times need to be worn together, at other times need to be worn separately. When it came to promoting that, showing, profiling or raising awareness of what we were doing, the Arts Centre as a brand wasn't something I was able to utilise. So there are similar complexities.

Neil Mackenzie:

I think a lot of this becomes about the nature of the work we are committed to. If you look at any area of life where there is a serious amount of experimentation and the interest is in innovation, creating things that are new, the assumption is that a lot of these things won't work. I've got images of Willy Wonka in my head at the moment. A lot of the new things will taste horrible, and you wouldn't want to put them in front of the public because they're not ready yet, but you have to have that process of creating the new. There's this experimental nature to any kind of cutting edge, and we've learnt this notion of innovation and contemporary. Contemporary has a far less scary edge to it, as it's just about making art that responds to and that deals with the now, and that's what we're trying to put into the right places, to have people experience directly.

I was talking to Battersea Arts Centre this morning, and they were very keen to send us some very emergent arts practice which they think is fantastic – and I'm sure it probably is – but I don't think we have the the kind of context that can take it...because it might not be. It might be very interesting, but not fully rounded yet, it hasn't become what it needs to be. The audience for that kind of work needs to be very informed, needs to be able to say 'yes, this has failed, but in an interesting way', rather than 'what was that!' It's a really difficult thing to get right, but this is contemporary arts practice, it's bound to be difficult to place, and won't be appropriate to place sometimes unless we've got a very developed context. The university has one; it's got staff and people that have been developed by culture. The students aren't really part of that because they're so young; they're almost as new as someone that hasn't encountered it at all, so we're trying to do very difficult things here. It's not that we're not doing it very well, it's genuinely difficult.

Carola Boehm:

The question that is posed there is how wide the frameworks are. Of course we've mentioned the Department, we've mentioned the Axis Arts Centre. Somewhere in there is the building – Cheshire Contemporary Arts, and there's discussions of how we brand ourselves, how we identify ourselves in the future to possibly incorporate all activities to create this unique identity, or do we need separate identities that sit completely separate from each other?

Jane Linden:

I don't know, I think the interesting thing – and indeed the challenge – is how we consider the ways through which we both retain the individual value of our practices whilst acknowledging their wider significance in terms of public...institutional agendas. Let's not allow the tail to wag the dog or we'll forget the real integrity of what we do. Having said that, we did talk about having this umbrella brand where all these different activities can happen... and sometimes they may clash. Some things may be more measurable than others and perhaps they can support the more illusive nature of some of what we do? We talked about possibly forming bridges here and there between different kinds of activities, but we can't be expected to fully embrace each other's agendas. All we can do is keep talking about it, keep thinking about the potential to develop new projects and research initiatives between ourselves, where there might be some possible link. We could do something in the OpenSpace, or as part of a Curating Knowledge project which actually fulfils another agenda as well, but we can't expect all of these things to work together all the time and for their value to be measured against one another. I think it's important that we have this umbrella, 'mother ship' I think we called it at one time, with other satellites spinning around it and occasionally colliding.

Ornette Clennon:

I do have to ask then how we create the opportunities where we could collaborate if we wanted to. At the moment it's very happenstance. That has practical implications on programming, so if we did want to collaborate and have something as part of the Art Centre, where would we find the time in the season to do that? That's what I meant about having an infrastructure, that would allow us to do that if we wanted to, I'm not saying that we should...

Jane Linden:

There are practical considerations though, particularly with the work that Neil programmes. Demands on the space, and constraints on our own time – of course...

Ornette Clennon:

It's those sorts of things that, maybe not tonight, but that we could talk about.

Carola Boehm:

I'm aware that we only have seven minutes left, and that there are probably as many experts in the audience as are up here, and young talent. It would be interesting to hear a few voices of how you see the Axis Arts Centre, how you have encountered it through the years.

Audience Member 1:

Before we move on too far from measuring impact, an image and metaphor springs to mind about a rainforest activist trying to save thousands of trees. I always think it's really useful for him to count how many trees he's already saved, but if it's a choice between that and going out and saving some more which is the crux ... if you can do both then great. A centre such as this, which partially relies on volunteers, it's got quite minimised efforts in things like marketing, if those are the actions which take up the time of the volunteers then... I was working at the brass band event on Monday, and I was handing out questionnaires. I just thought of the standing ovation, and the beaming applause; that was feedback.

Carola Boehm:

But what if the paperwork to say how many trees you've saved, gives you the money to save ten times more in the next round. That's the reality of it. This is another discussion really, but the funding world has moved to be more project-based. That's difficult, specifically for us. It's not as if we get an annual grant, we have to apply every year, for every project. Not just us, 'us' as a society works like that. It's a big society problem around how funding is allocated. Absolutely, I agree with the point.

Gavin Carver:

Our question appears to be "which trees to save?"

Carola Boehm:

Any other responses in terms of how you see the Axis Arts Centre?

Audience Member 2:

For me personally, I've worked quite a lot in the OpenSpace, on self-initiated projects which have been related to the MA course that I've done here, and now I'm moving forward to the PhD. So, having the opportunity has been really good for my professional development, and I think that is something which is really integral to the sustainability, maybe we could focus more efforts into helping other students utilise the spaces for their own professional development.

Jane Linden:

You're a great example of that. You're what's out there at the moment.

Audience Member 2:

Everyone's been interacting with that outside. Musicians are coming in, putting gloves on and getting involved.

Audience Member 3:

I'm glad we could pick up on that. When I came here on my first day there was an event on, and something different happening in every studio, there was even work in place in the OpenSpace. Just thinking about the first discussion you had about your work, and periodically the sandwiches that

get eaten between rehearsals, the different relationships, my relationships that I've been photographing on my camera today. That passage of time, across a trajectory of time where there are these different qualities to encounter with the space and what's happening. Sometimes quite tangential and placid, sometimes very rich and developed. Those opportunities present all kinds of different experiences, and there are different potentialities within that that brings impressions of measurability, so on and so forth. There seems to be a rich area of thought around that.

Carola Boehm:

Thank you. As a last thing, I'm going to throw out a question, and ask the panel members to say some sound bites, very short, nothing more than one sentence. Axis Arts Centre: how do we move forward?

Gavin Carver:

Clarity of identity and clarity of purpose.

Neil Mackenzie:

Keep doing what we're doing, and do it better.

Jane Linden:

Dialogue. Dialogue. Dialogue.

Jodie Gibson:

From the cacophony of voices, some camp clarity and quiet to help me do my job would be great.

Ornette Clennon:

Building clearer infrastructures.

Carola Boehm:

Indeed, but with a rich diversity! Thank you all.